

# Vanishing Culture

*Images  
and  
Voices  
of  
Cortez  
Fishing  
Folk*



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Contemporary photographs by Wayne Nield.

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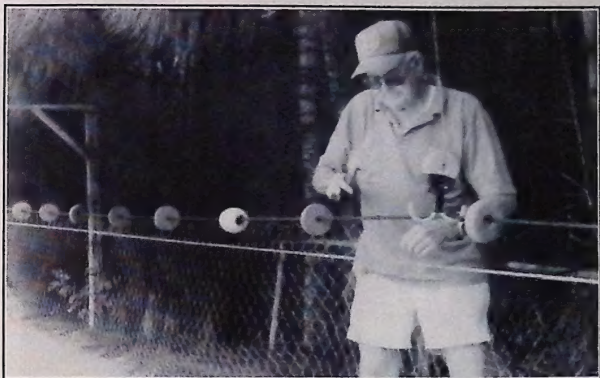
*Vanishing Culture: Images and Voices of Cortez Fishing Folk* was a collaboration between maritime anthropologist Michael Jepson and artist/historian Wayne Nield to document the folklife of Cortez fishing village through oral history and photography. Funding was provided by the Florida Humanities Council and the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage. Additional support was received from the Library of Congress American Folklife Center through the donation of recording equipment.

Recent threats to their occupation, community, and cultural heritage have challenged Cortesians' unique sense of identity and faith, adding urgency to this project. The fishing folk are a traditional group in Florida, but, like so many others their voice is often unheard. Through documentation of both their voices and images the cultural significance of this group becomes obvious. Through oral history and photo archives, interpretive stations and mural, lecture series, and art exhibition *Vanishing Culture...* provides a forum for others to hear the fishing folk of Cortez.

The archives created through *Vanishing Culture...* are held by the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage and are available to the public. The photographic interpretive stations and mural have been placed out of doors at the core of the Historic District for public viewing. At each of the four contiguous sites which define the old harbor (Bell Fish Co., Star Fish Co., Taylor Boatworks, and Fulford Fish Co.) a total of four photo-montages with text enable visitors to learn the importance that occupational skills, food, music and much more lend to the cultural significance of Cortez fishing folk. The mural executed by Rose Swafford further documents their sense of place in a sometimes urban and rapidly changing landscape.

A more personal form of expressing the "*Images and Voices*" of Cortez takes the form of an exhibition of personal artworks. Like the interpretive stations, these works by Wayne Nield are based upon the "sense of the sacred" so often expressed by traditional groups in specific geographical settings. These are presented as the "artifacts" collected by an imaginary expedition.





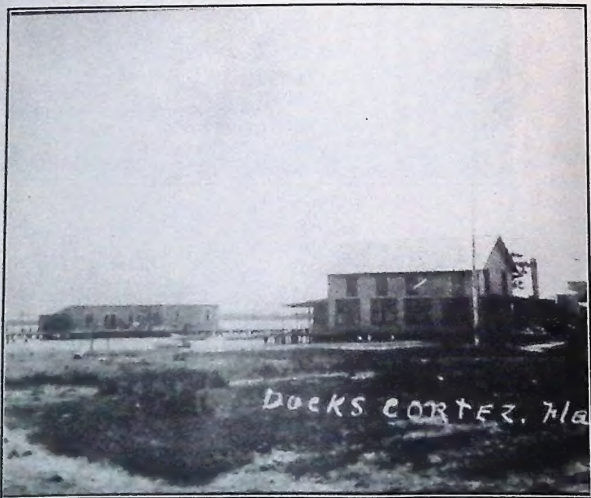
*Joe would go buy Pompano, he wouldn't buy no small ones—he'd always get a pound, three quarters, two pound Pompano like that—and they'd broil them Pompano and they'd serve you half of a Pompano with all the stone crab claws you wanted to eat and everything else on the table for \$1.50. That wasn't yesterday, son."*

Paul Taylor  
reminiscing  
about Joe  
Guthrie,  
owner of  
Albion Inn

Cortez fishing village has existed on the northern tip of Sarasota Bay for over a century. Originally known as Hunter's Point, this once itinerant fishing camp was temporary home for Cuban and Bahamian fishermen from Havanah and Key West. In the late 1800's fishermen who had migrated to Florida from North Carolina moved to this area and began to fish local waters. Others soon followed and this impermanent fishing camp was transformed into a

community of fishing families. In 1888 a postal official designated the village Cortez, as it is known today. The community has endured extraordinary pressures to change and today still reflects the North Carolina and Spanish heritages that give roots to these fishing families.

**L**ike all fishing communities, Cortez is a *Natural Resource Community* in that everyday life is intrinsically





connected to the rhythm of nature. For generations, there has been an intimate relationship between daily living and the marine environment.

**C**hanges in weather or phases of the moon which affect the tides, currents, and marine life have governed fishermen's work and social life for ages. Other environmental phenomenon, like red tides or hurricanes, have had dramatic effects upon village economy,

family life, and ultimately survival. Today, biological cycles within the environment have continued to influence economic and social interactions within the community .

**T**his important bond with the physical environment has not only dictated occupational participation, but has structured community interaction and defined social values for those living in Cortez. Adaptation to working on the water has had important

*I watched Mr. Taylor down there build many a one of 'em. And man, they really took pride in buildin' their boats back in them days. And they done it all by hand, too. They didn't have all this electric equipment.*

Albert "Junie" Mora



*Fish and grits.  
Fish and grits  
and biscuits.  
We had plenty  
but that's  
about it. Oh,  
Daddy'd go  
out to a farm  
in East  
Manatee and  
trade fish for  
vegetables and  
there was  
always plenty  
to eat on the  
table. It  
wasn't steak or  
somethin' like  
that, but it was  
always good.*

Vernon Mora

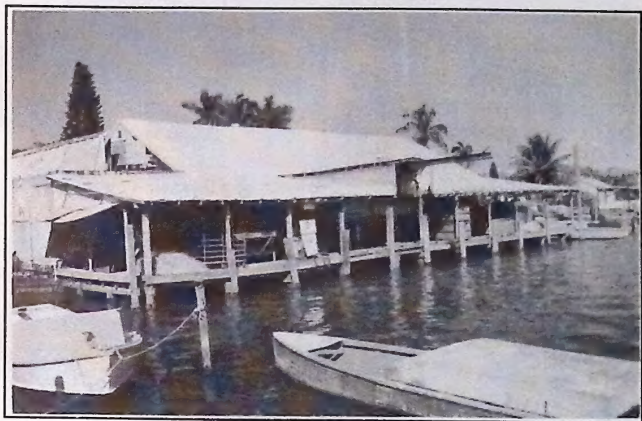
implications for the community as a whole because of the necessary support activities that take place on land, such as net hanging & mending; fish handling & preparation; boat building & repair.

The use of physical space near homes for occupational needs is noticeably different from surrounding communities. Boats, nets, and all types of fishing gear can be found in a fisherman's yard throughout the year.

Unlike recreational & leisure communities, social life within Cortez is determined more by cycles of fish behavior than the seasonal migration of tourists. Coupled with the close ties that come from working and living in a community with several generations of kinspeople on a daily basis, a unique sense of community and place has been forged.

The close relationship with the environment found within Natural Resource





Communities strongly influences the sense of place for its inhabitants in a variety of ways. For the commercial fishermen of Cortez their community extends far beyond the usual landlocked definition of community measured in metes and bounds. This unique sense of place goes beyond the yards, fish house and docks to include a vast area of rivers, coves, creeks and bays that make up the fishing grounds for generations of commercial fishermen. An illustration of this sense of place can be

heard through dockside conversations among commercial fishermen. Place names like "Wild Irishman's Cut," "Hottentot Bayou," or "Hell's Half Acre" are heard over and again describing daring exploits, great catches or monumental failures.

These terms are part of the local fishing folklore and will likely never appear on popular maps of Florida's coastline. However, a Cortez commercial fisher could possibly take you there

*I remember whenever I started fishin' we didn't carry any ice. We'd just use a burlap bag and we'd wet it every once in awhile and throw it over the boards we were walkin' on and help shade the fish. Seemed like they were alright cause we'd eat 'em every time we'd come in.*

Raymond  
Guthrie

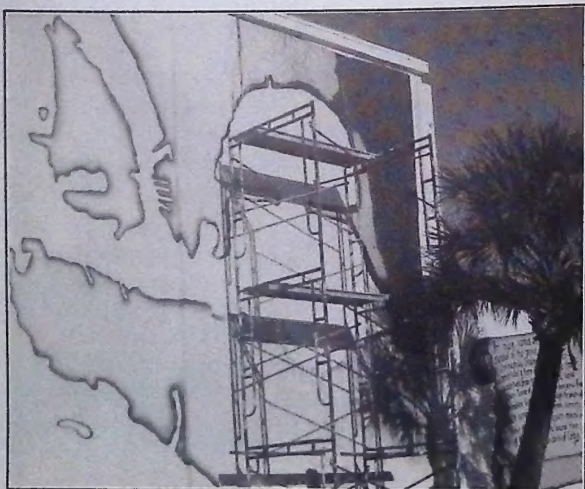


*Well, they had dirt streets and no electricity in the '20s when I was small. We had kerosene lamps and there was sand roads that'd burn your feet. We'd go to school barefooted right here in Cortez. Then sometime before the '30s they did run a light wire out to Cortez and we got little old 25 watt*

on a moonless night, in a dense fog.

Such place names often identify landmarks that are unrecognizable to the uninitiated. In some cases they may have lost their practical use, but remain significant for their importance as markers of group identity. Furthermore, the symbolic importance of certain landmarks can be understood only through the experiential meaning gained from being raised in a community like Cortez.

In an attempt to recognize the symbolic value placed upon geographical landmarks or built structures by residents within small communities the term "Sacred Structures" is often used. The term defines those places, such as buildings, structures or open spaces, which exemplify and reinforce everyday lifeways and/or special events within the community. The value placed upon Sacred Structures often stems from a long term association by community members. The importance placed upon them is often intuitive and





may become apparent only when the structure is threatened through redevelopment that includes "alteration or destruction.

To the professional planner, architect, or historian, Sacred Structures may have little appeal, for they often consist of dilapidated buildings that were settings for daily routines, like fish processing, net mending, boatbuilding, story telling, etc.

The historic importance of these structures is often confined to local knowledge.

In Natural Resource Communities there are many Sacred Structures. They have importance because of the folk traditions that have evolved around the generational use and occupational adaptation to working on the water.

*bulbs. You couldn't see much better. But it was very primitive out here. You had outside rest rooms. You had no bathroom whatsoever. You had wood stoves or kerosene stoves. You didn't have any central air or heat, I'll tell ya that. Didn't even have a fan. And mosquitoes, oh Lord! And rattlesnakes.*

Stargill Pringle

*It's that bunch  
of oyster  
rocks out in  
front of  
Fulford's  
Dock. For  
some reason  
I've always  
heard it called  
Jim  
Campbell's  
rock pile... But  
its got a  
majesty about  
it. I guess it's  
about as close  
as you can get  
to God without  
gettin' there.  
It's a little bit  
of heaven to  
me.*

Raymond  
Pringle

Such places take on new significance in the face of redevelopment and are important symbols to community members as they address change in their community. Change that comes in many forms and has often been disguised as progress with the promise of opportunity.

Cortez's waterfront has become especially vulnerable to land-based development pressures given today's strict regulations being placed

on the harvesting of fish and habitat degradation. Reallocation of marine resources has put commercial fishermen at a disadvantage and now challenges their survival on the water. That survival on the water is directly linked to their survival within their communities.

The problems facing Florida's coastal communities reflect larger societal difficulties. As they adapt to change, traditional communities like Cortez, reveal a hidden part of







Florida's past that is worth preserving. While often in conflict with traditional growth and development within the state, these historic communities offer a source of cultural and economic diversity that is every bit as important to our society as biodiversity is to our ecosystem. It is important to recognize that Natural Resource Communities require conservation of both

cultural and natural resources. Only through careful historic preservation and sound ecosystem conservation can communities like Cortez survive and remain a vital part of Florida's future.

*Well, you know, rural people look after each other a good bit and I think the people here in Cortez look after each other....If there's a want or a need they tend to it. I've always felt very much at home. I've always felt right at home here in Cortez.*

Rita Warden







*The Expedition  
for the  
Archaeology of  
Scarecrows*

It is only very recently that our 350+ year old country has become an urban culture. The US census confirms that while for most of our national history we have been an agrarian culture in which the majority of Americans lived on, worked on or somehow derived a living from agriculture. Agriculture has traditionally included commercial fishing with farming. In the late 20th century, however, most Americans are "urban" and seem indifferent to the plight of farmers and fishing folk.

Some time ago I learned about the importance in early agrarian societies of Scarecrows, those who protected that which was most dear to the group. Their traditions include Scarecrows, Myriahs, Cornmothers, etc. I also

began to wonder what kind of scarecrows were needed for the threats of the Late 20th century.

A story evolved in which an imaginary Expedition attempts to find those holy sites which were/are the scene of a traditional relationship between humans and Gnature. These archaic communities are pre-Endvasion. The "findings" of the Expedition for the Archaeology of Scarecrows are periodically presented in exhibitions of photos, artifacts, etc.

Prior to living among the fishing folk of Cortez, Florida, my works have often focused on places where the people have a "sense of place" and where there is a historic relationship between human activity and the topography which shapes it. These included installations about an 18th century mill valley

("Aqua Dreams..."), farmland transformed into row-houses ("Father\$land"), demolition of a 19th century harbor ("Fragile:Baltimore") et al.

Cortez Fishing Village is the subject for "...Archaeology of Scarecrows (South)." This time the Expedition has located Relequarie, Altars to a Sacred Place and of course Scarecrows.

Most of us "urbanfolk" have no idea of what it takes to get food from the land or water to the table. We do not or can not feed ourselves. And yet, ever accepting of faulty definitions of Progress and faithful in the ability of Science to work it all out somehow, we continue to allow our farmers and watermen (farms and fishing villages) to be irrevocably replaced by urban sprawl. In so doing we witness a major point in history when traditional people (i.e. those who feed us) become an

endangered species. They have already become extinct in many places.

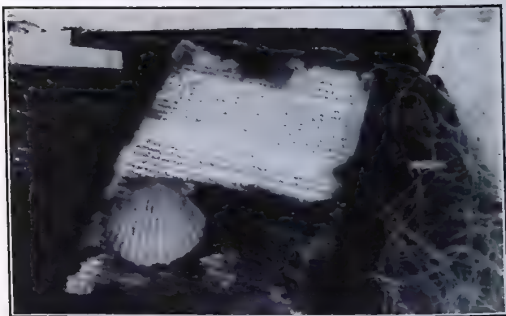
Cortez, Florida is yet another example. My impression of the situation here is that the urbanized mainstream with a particular penchant for tourism undervalues the traditional community and even sees it as in the way of Progress. For all of the talk about environmentalism and conservation this sacred place is shown little reverence compared to what it deserves.

*Wayne Nield  
Cortez  
Sept. 1994*

## Artifacts from the Expedition (Sample Inventory)



*"Relequarie:  
Main Altar"  
(Conjectural  
Reconstruction)*



*"Relequarie:  
Main Altar"  
(Detail)*

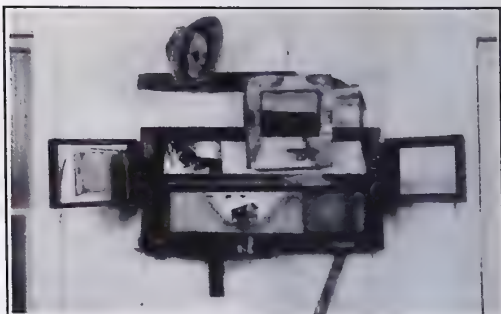


*"Relequarie:  
Main Altar"  
(Detail)*





*"Reliquarie  
: Main  
Altar"  
(Detail)*



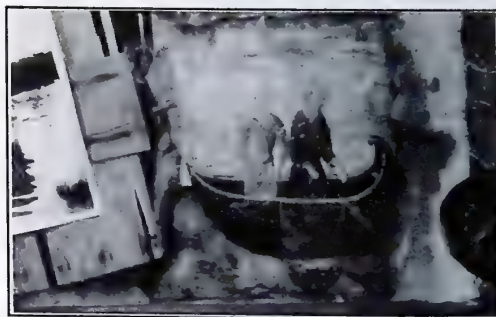
*"Altarpiece:  
Kitchen"*



*"Altarpiece:  
Kitchen"  
(Detail)*



*"Altar:  
Seagrapes"  
(Detail)*



*"Altar:  
Seagrapes  
(Detail)"*



*"Target  
Practice"*

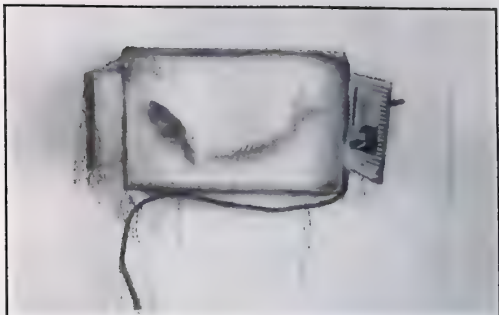


*"Scarecrow"  
(Fragment)*

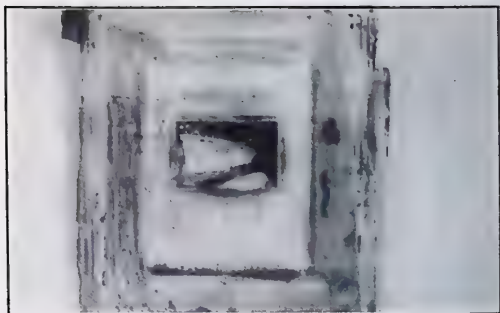




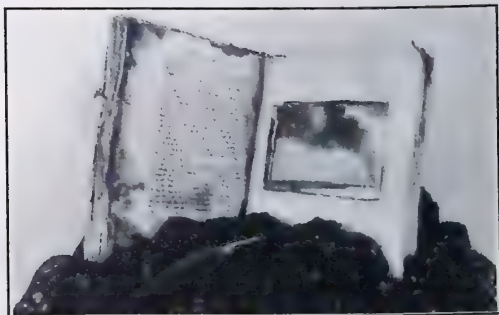
"...give us this  
day..."



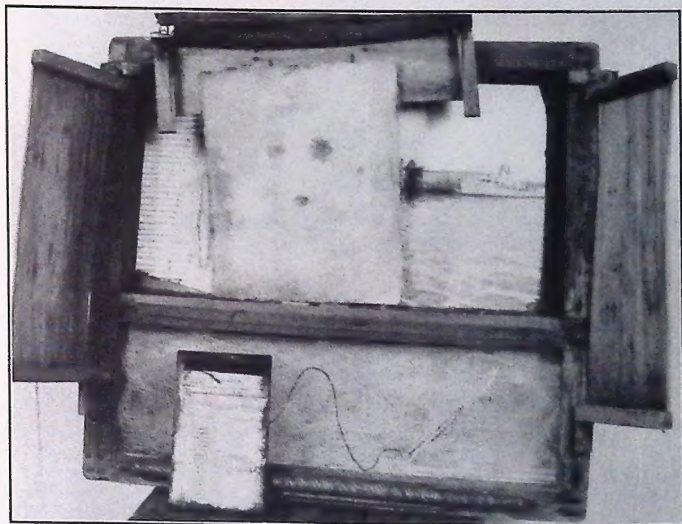
*"Altar with  
Relics"*



*"Interpretive  
Station #6"*



*"Bean's Point  
Late 20th  
Century"*

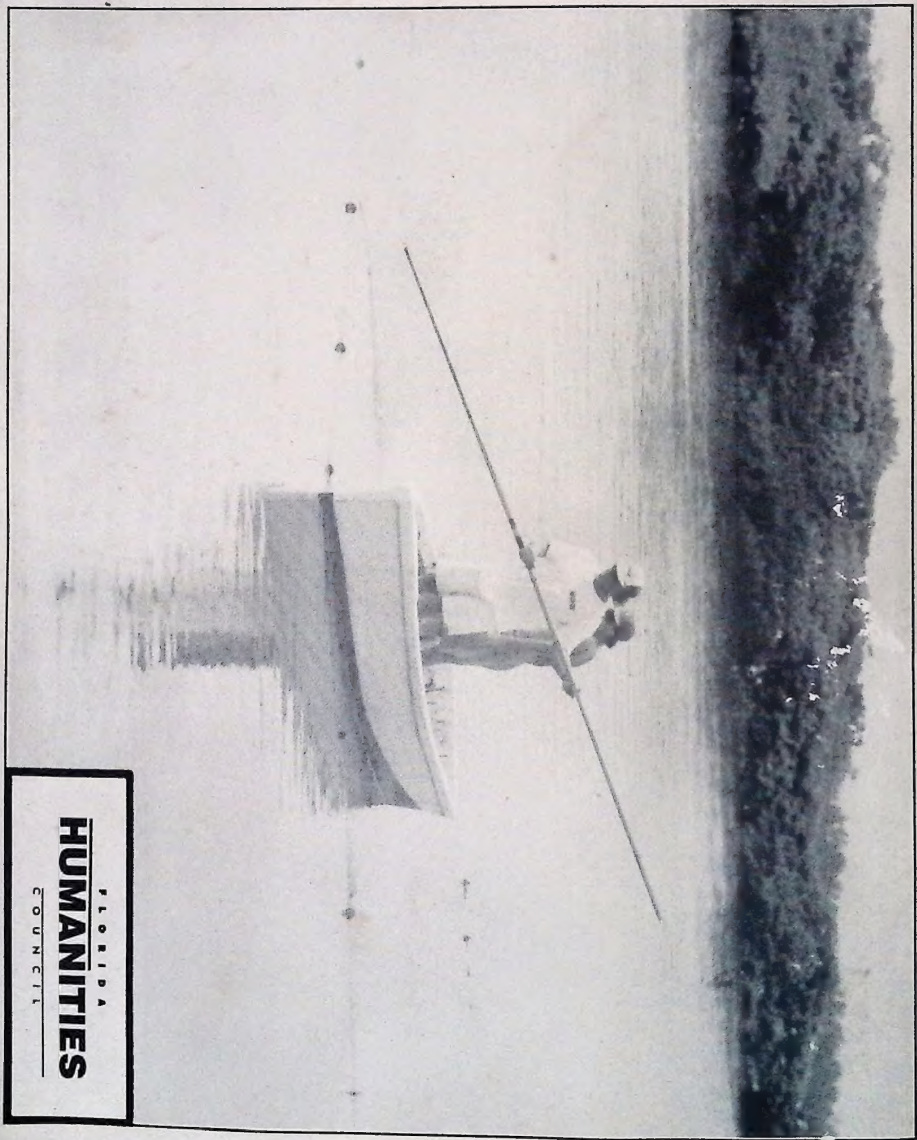


*"Scarecrow:  
Cortez Harbor  
#3"*









FLORIDA  
**HUMANITIES**  
COUNCIL